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ABSTRACT

In recent years, education has shifted its goals from acquiring a classical methodology to learning how to make a living. Students are taking fewer liberal arts courses; and at the same time, reading, thinking, and reasoning skills are declining. With the advent of Sputnik in 1957, the idea that hard science had the answers to the world's problems became pervasive. The era of high technology has promised that life will be easier and better. To view education only as training to learn how to make a living interrupts the process of learning to become a human being. The humanities teach one to explore, research, and analyze ideas. They enrich one's personal life and work. To be educated is to be provided with access to an abundant life and to understand the past with an ability to prepare for the future. The liberal arts enrich our lives and enhance our relationships with others. (SM)

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Liberal Arts in a High-Tech World

Kathryn E. Nelson

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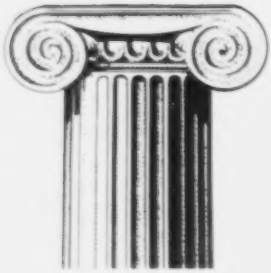

By

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A speech presented to
the Missouri Association of Community and Junior Colleges

October 1985

Let me begin by presenting my credentials for dealing with this subject in the form of three vignettes.

I grew up during a time when the argument was still raging about the best way for black folk to gain equality. One school of thought, represented by the followers of Booker T. Washington, believed that the route to equality was through economic advance and that economic advance would occur if we were trained to work with our hands. The second point of view espoused the notions of W.E.B. DuBois, that we should receive a classical education with the goal of becoming thinkers, planners, creators and leaders, thereby gaining economic security and, in turn, gaining equality. The argument goes on to this day and now includes more than black folk.

A second vignette ... My father was a boilermaker helper. He knew his trade and did good work. He had no more than a fifth-grade education. He worked hard until he was about sixty years old. Then he became ill. His cronies came to visit and play checkers at first, and then they didn't come anymore. He enjoyed baseball on television, but that didn't last long. After a time, he died. I believe he died because he stopped living. I knew stories from the war of men who stayed alive under horrendous conditions because they did word games in their heads or created mathematical constructs by marking on a wall, or made up stories. In short, they stayed alive because of the life in their minds.

Thirdly, a woman came from the east coast to Memphis. She had spent her career as a teacher in a girls' school. Now that she was retired, she wanted to find out for herself if southern black children could learn the same things she had taught her students. She opened a school that taught the basics together with foreign languages, music appreciation, writing, dancing, fine sewing ... she exposed her students to opera, to books about world travel, to bird calls. One little black girl in that school discovered a world of wonder and beauty — of adventure and excitement and creative expression that she never dreamed existed. I am that little girl, and it all happened when people were trying to decide if it was best to teach me a trade!

In recent years we have become increasingly aware of subtle and not so subtle shiftings from "classical education" to a limited notion of education as "learning how to make a living". Liberal Arts instructors have complained that students are taking fewer courses from their departments. Employers complain about the poor reading skills, spelling skills, thinking and reasoning skills of today's employees.

In 1984, Secretary of Education Terrel H. Bell appointed a panel of college professors officially known as the *Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education*. The seven-member group was headed by Kenneth P. Mortimer of Pennsylvania State University.

A *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* article of Aug. 20, 1984 reports that the ... "advisory panel wants colleges to require two years of Liberal Arts study, even if such a requirement forces students in business and technical fields to stay in college more than four years." The panel identifies what it calls "warning signals of a decline in the quality of higher education." The study warns: "The strains of rapid expansion of higher education, followed by recent years of constricting resources and leveling enrollments ... have taken their toll." It further states that, "The bachelor's degree has lost its potential to foster the shared values and knowledge that bind us together as a society."

hroughout our history any number of factors have been involved in these changes. The Westward Expansion and the growing pains of a rapidly-growing nation probably set in motion the beginnings of a sense of the need for new ideas in a new land. Freedom meant freedom from old ties and the old ways. The seeds of change had already been planted.

The Industrial Revolution and the exploding need for persons who had basic skills to man the new machine age accelerated the development of education for the citizenry and at the same time began the process of narrowing the social distance between classes in the developing new country. There was then another factor — a growing disdain for elitist notions, or those that might be construed to be elitist. Hence, a bit of a shadow was cast on "classical education". That argument about elitism continues to this day. A recent article in the *New York Times* quotes retiring Dr. Peter T. Flawn, University of Texas at Austin: "Though Texas has developed great urban centers, there is still a large population that is suspicious of elitism in any form ... A great university is elite. A new type of knowledge and information-based economy is developing. The land and its resources are no longer sufficient to carry Texas in a position of national leadership. We need a better understanding of the role of intellectual elitism."

As we grew into a highly industrialized nation, we were in a hurry. We were impatient. We were

hungry for trained workers. World Wars I and II heightened the pace and the need for more and more workers. The pressure of these wars encouraged the nation to make some decisions about what was important and unimportant. Some of these decisions influenced the direction of education.

The advent of "Sputnik" confirmed for a nation in change that the hard sciences had the answers to the world's problems and needs.

The 60's and 70's brought still new challenges. There was a new emphasis on equality. "Do your own thing ... I know what's good for me ... Don't trust anyone over thirty ... No one has the right to control my life ... The old values are oppressive." All these were popular notions of the era that contributed to changes in the nation's attitudes and practices in the area of education.

The emerging era of High Technology has made its promises that life will be easier and its problems more easily solved.

The result of this slow, but persistent change has been a shrinking concept of education as we have tilted toward a concept of "training" rather than "education".

hat, indeed, are we giving up? Just what is at stake? Observers of the social scene reply that we are beginning to accept less than wholeness for the growing individual. That the society suffers from a loss of skills for living, a loss of humanity and a growing lack of skills for dealing with a global society, a changing world, for managing the new technology and deciding whether it will be master or slave. Further we risk a loss of a sense of beauty, of creativity, of value and purpose and ultimately of control over our own destiny. We stand to lose our openness to new ideas, our appreciation of those who have gone on before us and therefore, our hope for the future.

To think of education as learning how to make a living is to mistake the by-product for the total process. The process of becoming a fully-functioning, productive human being involves physical, emotional, intellectual, social and spiritual growth. In this process, the person develops skills, understandings, feelings, behaviors, habits, traditions and principles that shape the individual, support, encourage, or inhibit personal expressions and directions.

This growth takes place in an environment peopled by other human beings and evolves through the offices of a number of institutions — the home, and religious and social institutions. The individual grows, matures, learns, develops the ability to move from concretes to abstractions, is able to think and to think about thinking. He/she moves from the acquisition of basic skills and

knowledge to the realm of higher education. At this point in life we do the growing, developing person a disservice if we stop short and say, "Now, all you need to do in order to live a full, meaningful life is to learn how to make money." Of course, learning how to make a living is never to be discounted as unimportant, but it certainly is not all there is to living. Living full, whole lives demands much more.

nly few decades ago, the literate person was one who had an eighth-grade education and could read at the fifth-grade level. The expectations of the time were that this person would live fifty or sixty years, probably in a rural or small-town setting, would work with his hands, would do the same job most of his life and would learn how to do that job as an apprentice. He would deal with little complex equipment, would meet few people outside his own community and would work long hours, so that life consisted of hard work, some simple recreation and family life, with Church, home and school as the main institutions influencing life. Life was simple, steady, slow-changing and relatively unchallenging.

Contrast that life with life today. We now enjoy a life expectancy of seventy or eighty years. We are part of an international community that clusters itself in and around large urban centers. We can expect to have several careers in a lifetime and we are connected to the

rest of the world with electronic media ties. Our lives are made, at once, simple and more complex by an array of machines and marvels of the electronic/electrical engineering age. We are highly mobile and deal with change as the one constant in our lives. We see ourselves at once weakened and strengthened by electronic marvels — calculators, computers, laser discs. Our world is changing from smokestack to service as we create robots to do, with greater precision and accuracy, the manufacturing processes that occupied our time and energies. We have increasing amounts of leisure time. We have time to reflect and we expect to grow and develop in a process we call life-long learning.

We have, by the nature of our very existence, redefined literacy so that it is something much more complex. Today's broadened definition of literacy, as recently defined in a report of the Greater Cleveland Communication Skills Study Group housed at Cuyahoga Community College, includes the abilities to:

1. READ

- Identify and understand main and supporting ideas in written work, and summarize them in one's own words.
- Identify a writer's purpose and point of view, and use them to understand the writer's meaning.
- Use features of printed materials such as a table of

contents, titles and subtitles, index and glossary to enhance understanding.

- Define unfamiliar words from the context, from related words or by using a dictionary.

2. WRITE

- Write sentences in standard English.
- Organize, select, and relate ideas, and develop them into coherent paragraphs.
- Improve one's writing by reorganizing, correcting errors and rewriting.
- Gather information from written sources and write a report using this information.

3. SPEAK AND LISTEN

- Discuss ideas critically and constructively. Answer and ask questions clearly and concisely and follow spoken instructions.
- Identify the main and supporting ideas in a discussion and report accurately what others have said.
- Conceive, develop and organize ideas for the purpose of speaking to a group, and present them clearly in standard English.

4. REASON

- Define problems, and propose and evaluate solutions.
- Draw conclusions from written or spoken information, and defend one's conclusions rationally.
- Distinguish between fact and opinion.
- Reason logically, and identify faulty logic.

At a recent seminar on the Humanities, Robert Gross, Harvard Ph.D. in Comparative Religions, now a headhunter for an executive search firm, said, "The study of the Humanities is an opportunity to enter into pleuralistic frameworks." He believes that the best candidate for senior management in a Fortune 500 company "is someone who is adaptable to change and can write and speak well, present ideas clearly and deal with multiple ideas simultaneously in a fast-paced environment."

St. Louis Circuit Judge Anna Forder told how she used her B.A. in History to discover what's already been done and avoids trying to rediscover the wheel. Her master's degree in Social Work has helped her to understand human motivation and predict social trends.

Attorney Steven Clark, an English major and free-lance writer before law school, says "The writing I

do now as a federal magistrate's clerk is the most demanding of all because the meaning of every word must be precise."

Lawyer Mark Howerstein saw his Philosophy major as the foundation for logic, research, writing, analysis of ideals and ethical norms and historical understanding.

Dr. Rudolph Gillian, gasteroenterologist and poet, observed that the Humanities heighten sensitivity in all human interactions.

The concensus of all participants was that "the Humanities teach one to explore, to research and analyze ideas, to think, speak and write clearly and to use imagination ... to develop historical understanding. They enrich one's personal life and one's particular work. Most of all, they bestow a sense of perspective and a humble and humane awareness that one's own field is a single aspect of a multidimensional world."

In summary, to be educated is to be provided with access to abundant life. To be educated is to search for wholeness, to tune the senses to the beauties, the subtletries, the incongruities, the patterns of life. To be educated is to develop creativity and imagination that will lift us into realms yet unknown. To be educated is to

develop a sense of awe and connection to things eternal. To be educated is to have roots and wings ... to have a past, the present and a vision of the future. It is to have access to the wisdom of the ages and to be a creator of new knowledge. To be educated is to "know" what is worth dying for and more, what's worth living for. To be educated is to discover the joy of being a human being.

The Liberal Arts enlighten, enrich, clarify values and expand and enoble our relationships with others. They give perspective and help us accept ourselves and others. They give us cause to rejoice in our strengths and strengthen us to seek change in our weaknesses. The Liberal Arts focus our attention on first principles and point us to heights where knowing is not enough and we are left with faith in things not seen.

Kathryn E. Nelson
October 1985

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Kathryn E. Nelson

Coordinator of the Learning Achievement Center at St. Louis Community College at Forest Park

- **Master of Arts**, Religious Education, joint degree, Columbia University Teachers College and Union Theological Seminary, New York City, N.Y.
- **Bachelor of Arts**, Social Science, LeMoyne-Owen College, Memphis, Tenn.
- Multi-career experience with a single focus on "people-making" with a goal of improving the quality of life.

Kathryn Nelson has served as a college teacher, teacher on a Navajo reservation, missionary for the Episcopal Church in Haiti (director of Christian Education for the missionary district of Haiti) doing teaching and youth-work, social worker with children with family problems at the Annie Malone Children's Home, public school teacher in inner-city St. Louis, nursery school director at the Junior Kindergarten, Page-Park YMCA, providing educational experiences for young children and their families in West-end St. Louis.

At St. Louis Community College at Forest Park she directed the development of the Child Development Associate curriculum, served as chairperson of the Human Services department, as acting Associate Dean of Business and Social Science and presently serves as Coordinator of the Learning Achievement Center. The Center provides activities in support of the teaching/learning processes of the College including developmental coursework, study skills help and study skills seminars, tutoring, study groups, supplementary instruction/discussion and special projects for honors students.

An advocate for children, she has participated in various boards and organizations: The Education Confederation, The Model Cities Child Care Corporation, The Advisory Committees of the Miriam School, Wilson School, Crossroads School, The College School and the Family Resource Center; the Board of the Maternal and Child Health Council, The Girl Scouts of Greater St. Louis, Camp Wyman, and the Christian Children's Home. She participated in the development of the St. Louis

High School Leadership Program, the Parent/Infant Interaction Program and Teen Outreach Program.

Nelson created and hosted "Growing Together" a 40-show series relating to parenting and education on Channel 9, St. Louis' public television station.

Awards: 1972 *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* Woman of Achievement and the 1972 Newspaper Guild Front Page Award.
Also, awards from the Girl Scout Council, The Episcopal Diocese of Missouri, The Rhinehold Niebuhr Award from Eden Seminary, The St. Louis Black Muslims for Contributions to Family Life, The Anti-Defamation League Humanitarian Award, The Early Child Care Corporation Hugh White Award for contributions to Early Childhood Education, and The Alpha NU Chapter of Phi Delta Kappa Award for contributions to Education.